

don't walk away by diogxnes

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Families of Choice, Gen, Good Parent Jim "Chief" Hopper, Hurt/Comfort, also listen i know that joyce would not realistically sleep through this, but please humor me for the sake of dad!hop and gratuitous hurt/comfort, yes this is post-starcourt and yes hopper is alive and well don't ask questions

Language: English

Characters: Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers

Relationships: Jonathan Byers & Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-05-31

Updated: 2021-05-31

Packaged: 2022-03-31 20:36:38

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 1

Words: 3,352

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

He's never been quite sure of where he stands with Jonathan. He likes the kid, feels protective of him the way he does of everyone in their ragtag little end-of-the-world group. And he's pretty sure Jonathan likes him well enough too, or at least tolerates and grudgingly trusts him, but he's never been able to shake the feeling that Jonathan rather resents Hopper's place in his family's lives. And that's fair enough, Hopper supposes, given everything with Lonnie and the circumstances under which Hopper had started showing up. He doesn't blame him.

Jonathan gags again—the sound is louder now and even more unpleasant from the hall than it had been from the bedroom—and Hopper finally forces himself to go to the door.

don't walk away

Author's Note:

been having a lot of feelings lately about hopper & jonathan. here's the result.

cw for depictions of vomiting

Somebody is puking in the bathroom.

Hopper is very, very tempted to ignore it. The only person he'd willingly get out of bed for right now is El, and he knows it isn't El because he can feel her curled up against him, her warm breath tickling his neck as she sleeps. He tries to tell himself that staying in bed would be only moderately selfish. After the day he's had, he's earned a good night's sleep. Or at the very least, *El* has earned a good night's sleep, and he doesn't want to disturb her. So really, for El's sake, ignoring it is the only option.

He lets his eyes slide shut. The horrible noise comes again.

Still, he doesn't get up just yet. If it's Joyce, he reasons, she won't want him there. She's proud, too proud for her own good, and Hopper barging into the tiny bathroom while she's puking would only embarrass her or make her angry. And if it's Will or Jonathan in there, they'd rather have their mother than him.

He's exhausted enough, still in enough pain, that this reasoning is almost enough to make him stay in bed. But the longer he listens to the painful-sounding gags coming from next door, the more the anxiety rises in him. Suppose one of them has a concussion that went unnoticed? Suppose whoever it is needs to go to the hospital but doesn't want to worry anyone by waking them up? Suppose *It*—*It* with a capital *I*, the newest horrible monster without a name—suppose *It* latched onto one of them somehow and is making them sick? It happened to Will last year; it could happen again. Suppose—

“Fuck,” he says aloud, without really meaning to.

He moves slowly, trying to disentangle himself from El without waking her. She's a light sleeper, usually, but now she's so exhausted that she barely stirs, just burrows deeper into the pillows and sighs in her sleep. Despite his growing sense of urgency, Hopper just watches her for a moment. She looks so young like this. She *is* young, of course, so young that it makes something ache deep in his chest if he thinks about it too long, but it still catches him off guard sometimes. It's not fair, what the world has done to her already in her short life. He shakes his head to clear the thought. El is fine, he reminds himself, at least for now. El is fine, and somebody who is not El is puking in the bathroom.

As silently as he can, he crosses Joyce's small bedroom and opens the door, peering out into the hall. It's mostly dark, but he can just see Will's bedroom door—it's shut. He knows Joyce is in there with him for the night, unwilling to let him out of her sight; it's the reason Hopper and El are in her bed instead of on the couch.

It's Jonathan's door that's slightly ajar.

He sighs, hesitating slightly before stepping out into the hall and shutting the door softly behind him. Selfishly, he'd hoped it was either Joyce or Will—not because he *wanted* to see them hurting, of course not; he's seen enough of that for several lifetimes. It's just that they'd be easier to take care of. Joyce is his friend—his best friend, and maybe something more—and Will's just a kid, a kid who Hopper has seen in far less dignified conditions than this.

But he's never been quite sure of where he stands with Jonathan. He likes the kid, feels protective of him the way he does of everyone in their ragtag little end-of-the-world group. And he's pretty sure Jonathan likes him well enough too, or at least tolerates and grudgingly trusts him, but he's never been able to shake the feeling that Jonathan rather resents Hopper's place in his family's lives. And that's fair enough, Hopper supposes, given everything with Lonnie and the circumstances under which Hopper had started showing up. He doesn't blame him.

Jonathan gags again—the sound is louder now and even more unpleasant from the hall than it had been from the bedroom—and Hopper finally forces himself to go to the door.

“Hey, kid?” he calls, barely above a whisper, trying not to wake anyone else. He raps lightly on the door with his knuckles. “You okay in there?”

Jonathan doesn’t answer, just launches into another wave of retching so violent that Hopper winces in sympathy.

“Jonathan?” he tries again. Still there’s no answer, and now he’s starting to get genuinely worried. He knocks one more time before giving up and putting his hand on the doorknob. “I’m gonna come in, okay?”

He waits a moment so that Jonathan has a chance to protest before he opens the door just a crack. As soon as he sees that Jonathan is, at least, decent, he steps inside and shuts the door softly behind him.

“Oh, kid.”

Jonathan is on his knees, slumped over with his cheek pressed to the rim of the toilet. Hopper can see from where he stands how hard his whole body is trembling and the dark patches of sweat that cover his back. His hair is matted, damp, his face streaked with tears. Hopper sinks to a crouch beside him.

“M fine,” Jonathan mumbles unconvincingly. His voice is shaking as hard as his body and it sounds as if the words are painful to force from his throat. He flaps a hand at Hopper in what is probably meant to be a dismissive gesture but comes off far too pathetic to be taken seriously. “Y’can go.”

“You’re hilarious,” Hopper mutters. “What—”

He’s cut off when Jonathan gags again and lifts his head with great effort to hold it, trembling, over the toilet. His entire body shudders as he retches. After a moment’s hesitation, Hopper moves slightly closer to him to place a steady hand on his back.

Jonathan jerks away from the touch. He hunches over even farther, making a gasping sound that might have been a cry if his body wasn’t using up all its energy attempting to expel everything he’s ever eaten. He’s not even bringing anything up anymore, which isn’t surprising

given how long this has been going on. Really, Hopper's impressed the kid's still conscious. His concern continues to grow as he sits beside him, helpless, no longer trying to touch him but unsure how else to offer any sort of comfort.

"Jesus," he murmurs a few minutes later when Jonathan, finally spent, collapses with his cheek pressed once more to the rim. His eyes are squeezed tightly shut, but that doesn't stop fresh tears from leaking out, nor the silent, spasming sobs that shake him. There's a lot going on here, a lot to address, but if Hopper knows anything about Jonathan it's that he's as stubborn as his mother, unwilling to ask for help and reluctant to accept it even when it's offered. So he decides to start with the most practical, pragmatic thing he can think of. "I'll be right back," he says, "don't go anywhere," and stands to leave the room.

He returns a moment later with a glass of water and a dampened dishtowel. Jonathan has shifted slightly, still slumped over the toilet but now with his forehead pillowed on his arm. Hopper feels his heart clench with sympathy and concern.

"Hey, kid," he says quietly, settling on the floor beside Jonathan. "You think you can sit up?" Jonathan makes a whimpering noise that Hopper assumes is a no. He tries again. "I think you'll feel a little better if you can get that taste outta your mouth. Maybe get cleaned up a little." When Jonathan doesn't respond, he adds, hesitantly, "Can I help you?"

Jonathan shakes his head into his arm, but the prospect of having to submit to Hopper's assistance is apparently enough motivation for him to sit up on his own. He pushes himself upright on shaking arms, then slowly, stiffly, scoots himself back to lean against the wall. As soon as he's settled, he pulls his knees up to his chest and presses his forehead to them. Whether it's to keep a resurgence of nausea at bay or just to hide his tears, Hopper can't quite tell.

"I'm fine," Jonathan says again, his face still hidden.

"You're not fine." Hopper holds the glass out to him. "Here. See if you can take a couple sips. You don't have to swallow, just rinse and spit."

It's only with what looks like an incredible effort that Jonathan manages to take the glass, swish some water around in his mouth, and lean forward far enough to spit it out into the toilet. By the time he's set the glass down on the floor and curled up against the wall again, his whole body is trembling even harder than it had been before.

Hopper just sits there in silence for a few minutes, keeping him quiet company in a way that he hopes is comforting rather than awkward. Eventually he says, "Jonathan, I need you to tell me what happened. If there's something I should know about, something your mom should know about, if you need—"

Jonathan shakes his head. "No, I—it's not—" His voice is still shaking, so hard that the words are almost unintelligible.

"Not what?" Hopper prompts gently when he doesn't continue.

"I just—I—"

His breathing is starting to pick up, Hopper realizes with some alarm, and he feels a stab of guilt for apparently sending the kid straight into a panic attack with his questioning. "It's okay," he says. "It's okay, kid. You don't have to talk about anything. I just needed to know that you're safe."

Jonathan doesn't seem to hear him. He curls in on himself even further, his head bent low, clutching at his hair. "I don't—I don't—"

Hopper is starting to panic a little, too. He knows how to deal with this in his own kid; with Jonathan, he has no idea where to begin. Briefly he considers waking Joyce. She would *want* to be woken, if she knew what was going on. But she also needs rest just as desperately as any of them.

"Jonathan," says Hopper, quietly but firmly. "I need you to look at me. Can you do that? Just look at me, buddy."

Instead of looking up, Jonathan lunges forward to clutch the rim of the toilet again, heaving. Unsurprisingly, nothing happens, but Jonathan continues to spasm violently, gasping for breath and

seemingly unaware of the fresh tears streaming down his face.

“Shit,” Hopper mutters, and without thinking scoots forward to put a hand on Jonathan’s back again. This time Jonathan doesn’t jerk away. Hopper isn’t sure whether to count that as progress or a setback, whether Jonathan’s grown more willing to accept his help or is just in too much pain to have noticed. He rubs circles on Jonathan’s back, murmuring soothing words without really being aware of what he’s saying. “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

When Jonathan finally seems to be done, he doesn’t sit back so much as just collapse away from the toilet. He leans himself against the wall, upright in only the loosest sense of the word, sobbing so hard that Hopper is worried he isn’t taking in any air at all. He’s never seen Jonathan cry like this; not even close. He’d been tearful at the morgue, of course, and when he saw Will’s limp, hospital gown-clad body when all the shit hit the fan again the next year, and he’d wept with relief when Hopper told him that Will had been found. But nothing like this.

“Jonathan.” He speaks in the gentlest voice he can manage. “Please just let me help you.”

“I killed him,” says Jonathan.

Hopper blinks. “What?”

“I killed him.” He chokes the words out between sobs. “I—there were scissors, and I—he—”

Tom Holloway, Hopper remembers suddenly. In the hospital. Nancy had mentioned it earlier, at the mall, so briefly and almost off-handedly that he had immediately forgotten it in the face of the more pressing emergency. *Our boss was flayed too, Jonathan had to kill him, and then he became part of the—*

“I had to—I—”

“Oh, buddy.”

One evening, almost a year ago now, El had looked at him across the kitchen table and said abruptly, “I killed. Am I bad?” And Hopper

had felt his heart constrict so painfully he thought he might die.

“No, kid,” he’d said, fighting to keep his voice calm. “You killed because you had to. They were bad people who would have hurt you. And protecting yourself doesn’t make you bad. It wasn’t your fault. Okay? Nothing that happened was your fault.”

He says the same thing now to Jonathan. “It’s not on you, kid. Jonathan.” He reaches out to put a hand on Jonathan’s shoulder. “None of this was your fault. You understand me? None of this was your fault.”

“It—it is—” he manages. “If I had—I—”

“Jonathan,” Hopper says again, more softly. “Hey. You’re just a kid. Okay? Listen to me. You’re a kid, Jonathan. I know it doesn’t feel like it, but you are. You didn’t ask for any of this to happen. You just did what you needed to do to survive.”

At this, Jonathan finally raises his head to look at him. His eyes are swollen and red and there’s such a depth of hurt in them that Hopper feels close to tears himself. Jonathan opens his mouth as if to speak, but no words come out. He just looks at Hopper for a few long seconds, and then, almost in slow motion it seems, his face crumples. He squeezes his eyes shut but doesn’t bow his head again. Hopper leans forward and pulls Jonathan into his arms.

Jonathan doesn’t resist. He curls into Hopper, burying his face in his shoulder, and after a moment his hands come up to clutch at the back of Hopper’s shirt as if afraid that Hopper will push him away. He’s shaking so hard that it’s a miracle, Hopper thinks, that his very bones haven’t crumbled under the stress. He wraps his arms around him, cupping the back of Jonathan’s head with one hand and rubbing the other up and down his back.

“I’ve got you,” he murmurs. “I’ve got you.”

It takes a long time for Jonathan to cry himself out, and when he finally does, he makes no move to pull away. Hopper doesn’t mind, though his entire body aches from sitting in this position so long. He just continues to hold Jonathan close. Only when the pain starts to

grow unbearable does he finally say quietly, still rubbing Jonathan's back, "Why don't we move off this bathroom floor, yeah?"

Jonathan huffs a wet, shaky laugh into his shoulder. "Okay," he whispers, but it still takes a moment for him to move. Eventually he pulls back, wiping at his face. He's still trembling, but the tears are no longer falling.

Hopper stands and holds out a hand. "How about some fresh air, hm?"

Jonathan doesn't answer, but he does allow Hopper to help him up and then guide him out of the bathroom and down the hall. Hopper ushers him out onto the porch, leaving the door open behind him so that Joyce or El will immediately know where they are if either of them wakes up and comes looking. He waits until Jonathan is seated on the bench before settling beside him.

It's still warm, but night has taken away the heat's suffocating thickness and a light breeze has replaced the still, oppressive humidity that Hopper had walked through with Joyce and Alexei. For a few long minutes he only listens to the wind and the trees and the sound of Jonathan's breaths beside him, slowly becoming less shaky and more even as he calms down.

Jonathan is a good kid. They all are; he can admit that to himself, even if he won't say it out loud. And while he doesn't think a bad kid would deserve the shit they've gone through, either, it feels especially unfair that someone like Jonathan should now have to live with the burden of having killed somebody. Even if that person was already dead in every way that mattered. Hopper remembers the first time he killed. He'd been older than Jonathan is now, and it hadn't been so personal—just a nameless, faceless enemy combatant in Vietnam—but even so, the memory had never gone away. And he hadn't had even a fraction of Jonathan's empathy, his gentleness.

"You know," he says softly, "when I shipped off to Vietnam, I never really thought about what it would mean. About the things I might have to do."

He senses as much as sees Jonathan turn his head towards him; he

keeps his own eyes trained on the outlines of the distant trees.

"I wasn't...nice, as a kid. But I wasn't violent. I certainly never saw myself as a killer. Nobody ever does, I don't think. And even now..." He trails off, considering his words. He isn't sure, exactly, what he's trying to say, where he's going with this. But whatever it is, it feels important. "I've killed a lot of people, kid. I'm not proud of it. And I'd be lying if I said it ever became easy. It's a hell of a thing to have to live with."

"So how do you do it?" whispers Jonathan.

Hopper sighs heavily. "All those people...look, I don't even know if they were *bad* people, necessarily, not all of them. Some of them were probably just following orders. But they were orders that, if they'd been able to go through with them, would have hurt the people I care about. And as hard as it is to live with having killed them...it's a hell of a lot better than the alternative."

Jonathan doesn't answer.

"Tom would have killed you, Jonathan," says Hopper. They're harsh words, but he tries to say them gently. "And probably a whole lot of other people, too. Your brother. My daughter. So the way I see it, you saved a lot of people. Including the most important people in the world to both of us."

"But I couldn't save Tom."

Hopper glances at him. His face is almost expressionless, though his voice sounds tortured. He feels his own voice shaking a bit as he speaks. "He was already gone, kid. There wasn't anything left to save."

"Yeah," whispers Jonathan. "I *know* that, logically, but I just—" He looks up at Hopper, then quickly away. "I *stabbed* him, Hop. I—I know it wasn't Tom, not really, but I still—that didn't make it feel any different."

"I know," says Hopper.

He lifts his arm to drape it across the back of the seat. He doesn't

know what to say to make this better. He isn't sure there's anything that *can* make this better. All he can offer is his presence, and it doesn't feel like enough.

But then, to his shock, he feels Jonathan leaning into his side.

He must stiffen a bit in surprise, because Jonathan quickly pulls away. "Sorry," he mutters, not meeting Hopper's eye. "I don't know what—sorry."

"No," says Hopper, "no, it's okay." He wraps his arm around Jonathan's shoulders, pulling him against himself once more. "C'mere."

After a moment, he feels Jonathan rest his head against his shoulder. He tightens his grip automatically, rubbing his thumb against Jonathan's arm.

"You know," he says after awhile, "I'm proud of you."

"For what?"

"For surviving."

Jonathan doesn't respond, but Hopper thinks he feels him relax a little more against him. He thinks of El; he's glad that she has remained peacefully asleep. Joyce and Will, too. He lets out a deep sigh, feeling drowsiness begin to tug at him once more. He has no intention of going back to bed, though. Not yet.

He'll be here as long as Jonathan needs.

Author's Note:

thank you for reading! you can find me on tumblr @
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